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Wildfire in the Sariska Tiger Reserve that broke out on Sunday night has spread to over 10 sq km by Tuesday evening | P10

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Another shot at Oppn unity as Mamata writes to Cong, others

Says BJP is using enforcement agencies to harass its opponents out of vendetta

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @Kolkata

ACCUSING the BJP of attacking the country's institutional democracy by using central probe agencies, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee wrote to Opposition leaders and chief ministers of non-BJP ruled states urging them to come together and fight the "oppressive force".

The letter written on Sunday was made public on Tuesday. It was also sent to Congress chief ministers and the party's leadership, which was significant because Mamata had in the run-up to the recent polls to five states dissed the grand old party. Saying the UPA alliance is non-existent now, she had criticised the Congress for its inability to keep its flock together, adding it was incapable of providing leadership to an Opposition front.

Taking a fresh lead to forge an anti-BJP alliance ahead of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, she urged the leaders to suggest a suitable time and place to meet to take the process forward. "I urge that everyone of us come together for a meeting to deliberate on the way forward at a place as per everyone's convenience and suitability. The need for the hour is for all progressive forces in this country to come together and fight this oppressive (the BJP) force. Let us commit to the cause of a unified and principled opposition that will make way for the Government that our country deserves," she said.

Since it is her initiative, Mamata would naturally be the convenor of the meeting, sources in her Trinamool Congress said. In any case, Mamata has already made her ambition clear of becoming the prime ministerial face of the national Opposition coalition. Others in the race for the pole position include Telangana Chief Minister K Chandrashekar Rao.

"I am writing to you to express deep concern over direct attacks on this country's institutional democracy by the ruling BJP. Central agencies such as the ED, CBI, Central Vigilance Commission and the Income Tax Department are being used to target, harass and corner political opponents across the country for vendetta," Mamata said.

The letter comes at a time when her government is facing intense criticism over the Birbhum massacre that left nine persons dead. Also, ED had turned up its heat on her family. The ED summoned her nephew Abhishek Banerjee twice and sent a fresh notice to his wife and sister-in-law asking them to turn up at its office in Delhi in connection with a coal scam.

Abhishek no-show before ED

Abhishek Banerjee, the national general secretary of the Trinamool Congress, skipped the ED's summons to appear on Tuesday in connection with the money laundering case related to alleged coal smuggling in Bengal. He had appeared in the ED's office in Delhi on March 21

PARTIAL DE-ESCALATION AS RUSSIA TO CUT BACK OPS

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE

IN what may be a partial de-escalation of its invasion of Ukraine, Russia said on Tuesday it was cutting back operations near Kyiv and Chernihiv. Ukraine's military acknowledged the withdrawals.

However, the announcement was met with scepticism from the US and others with the Pentagon declining to corroborate Russia's claim.

Russia's deputy defence minister Alexander Fomin said the move is to create trust in the ongoing peace talks to halt the conflict. Several rounds of negotiations have been held so far but in vain. Fomin claimed there was some progress on Tuesday. "Negotiations on preparing an agreement on Ukraine's neutrality and non-nuclear status, as well as on giving Ukraine security guarantees, are turning to practical matters," he said.

Moscow's move to scale down its assault also comes in the wake of reports that Russian troops have become bogged down in the face of stiff Ukrainian resistance

The regional government headquarters of Mykolaiv in Ukraine, following a Russian missile attack on Tuesday, which killed seven people | PTI

Ahead of the talks, Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said his country was prepared to declare its neutrality. Moscow has demanded that the country drop any hope of joining the NATO alliance, which it sees as a threat. Zelenskyy also said he was open to compromise over the contested eastern region of Donbas.

The month-long war has reportedly killed thousands and displaced over 10 million Ukrainians. P11

River interlink project nixed ahead of Guj polls?

DILIP SINGH KSHATRIYA @ Ahmedabad

AMID intense protest from tribals against the proposed Par-Tapi-Narmada river inter-linking project ahead of the Gujarat election, the BJP leadership is learnt to have put the project on ice. While there was no clear word on whether it has actually been scrapped, Gujarat BJP president C R Patil said the central project was subject to approval from Maharashtra and Gujarat; with permission declined, it is as good as dead.

The decision to shelve the controversial project was taken at a meeting of Union ministers Amit Shah, Nirmala Sitharaman, Gajendra Singh Shekhawat and tribal MLAs and MPs from the state, Patil said.

Tribals are influential in Gujarat as 27 out of 182 Assembly seats are reserved for STs. They have been protesting after Sitharaman said in her Budget speech that the draft project reports of five river-linking projects, including the one in Gujarat, have been finalised.

With public outrage stalling the river-link project in Gujarat, there is now a question mark on other projects elsewhere in the country. While Patil explained that the project will not be given the go-ahead by the BJP, the Congress and tribal leaders are not convinced.

Gujarat Congress chief spokesperson Manish Doshi said if a decision to kill the project was indeed taken, it should have been announced by the chief minister of the state and not any party leader.

EXPRESS READ

PM Modi's visit to Bengaluru called off

Bengaluru: Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Bengaluru on April 5 has been called off. The PM was scheduled to meet his Israeli counterpart Naftali Bennett on Tuesday. However, sources said Bennett recently tested Covid positive and his visit to India has been called off.

K'taka collected ₹ 9,5k cr more than target: CM

Bengaluru: Amid the Covid pandemic, Karnataka managed to collect Rs 9,500 crore more than the revenue target, Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai said on Tuesday. "In the last five to six months, the market improved and the state did well in mobilising revenue," he said. P6

Rahul to visit Siddaganga Mutt, day ahead of Shah

DEVARAJ B HIREHALLI
@Tumakuru/Bengaluru

IN a game of political one-upmanship, BJP and Congress leaders are keen to impress the prominent Lingayat community in Karnataka ahead of the Assembly polls.

Senior Congress leader Rahul Gandhi is all set to pay a visit to Siddaganga Mutt near Tumakuru on Thursday, a day ahead of the scheduled visit of Union home minister Amit Shah to the mutt to take part in the 115th birth anniversary of Sri Shivakumara Swamiji.

Though the two parties claimed that the visits have got nothing to do with politics, their arrival in the state seems to be the beginning of hectic political activities ahead of the polls.

In fact, Rahul's visit was not preplanned like Shah's and it has been taken up on the advice of KPCC president DK Shivakumar to send out a message that Congress is not averse to Mutts and religious heads, sources said.

CONTINUED ON: P4

Drunk Rly cop brutally assaults elderly vendor in Mandya

S LALITHA @ Bengaluru

IN a scene straight out of the movie, Jai Bhim, where the police commit atrocities against backward communities, an inspector of the Railway Protection Force (RPF), who was drunk, allegedly picked up an elderly vendor at the Mandya railway station and thrashed him inside the police station on February 20. The vendor is now bedridden and unable to go to work as he has suffered a broken thumb and several other injuries. The inspector has been suspended and the inquiry is going on, while his junior has been transferred.

Before the assault came to light, a massive coverup operation was taken up to keep the brutality under wraps. The vendor was offered money and threatened to keep quiet, sources in Mandya said.

Injured 65-year-old Ninganna

They added that the Inspector, Aboo Ramachandran, who was upset over some professional issue, had allegedly consumed alcohol. "He saw 65-year-old Ninganna, who has worked as a vendor here for the last 20 years, serving a customer inside the railway station and called out to him. P3

JAB-O-METER
TAKE YOUR SHOT
March 28 22,89,185 doses
March 29 23,24,317 doses
TOTAL 1,83,79,06,022

NATIONWIDE	MAR 28	MAR 29
Fresh cases	1,270	1,259
Recoveries	1,567	1,705
Deaths	31	35

KARNATAKA	MAR 28	MAR 29
Fresh cases	48	42
Recoveries	105	104
Deaths	1	1

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